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Pushing Agenda for ABM's, Bush Prepares to Meet Putin

By MICHAEL R. GORDON

LONDON, July 18 — As President Bush prepares for meetings this weekend with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and other world leaders, the White House has stressed its desire to work out a new understanding with Moscow to replace the Antiballistic Missile Treaty of 1972.

But the Bush administration has already decided that it will not accept a new

"We don't want to have formal restrictions on development, testing and deployment," a senior administration official said today.

Mr. Bush's approach represents a radical break with the approach that has regulated military competition between Moscow and Washington for three decades — detailed, legally binding treaties that spelled out carefully negotiated limits and verification measures.

Administration officials say their stance reflects the end of the cold war and a desire to give the Pentagon maximum flexibility in devising defenses against potential missile threats from aspiring third world powers like Iran or North Korea.

But that approach is, at best, a hard sell with the Russians. In Moscow, Mr. Putin today tempered his criticism of Washington's plans for a limited defense but gave no hint that he was prepared to abandon the ABM treaty.

If Moscow fails to go along with the administration's approach, that is quite likely to cause serious consternation in Europe. Most European governments say if the 1972 treaty is to be abandoned it should be succeeded by a legally binding accord that regulates the development of strategic systems and makes the military balance more predictable.

For months, Mr. Bush, who arrived this evening in London, has been saying that he wants to replace the the treaty with a new strategic framework. Although many elements of the framework are still vague, one fact is clear, that the Pentagon has been given a free hand and a hefty budget to develop an antimissile defense.

The Pentagon has proposed an ambitious program to conduct antimissile tests in space, at sea, on aircraft and on land. Senior administration officials say that in devising a testing plan they did not take into account whether they had complied with the ABM treaty. The goal, they said, is to develop and deploy the systems as quickly as possible.

"We want to deploy a limited defense as soon as possible to deal with new threats," a senior administration official said. "And the capability we will have will in no way threaten the Russian offensive deterrent."

To reassure Russia that a missile shield would not threaten its nuclear deterrent, the administration is proposing to keep Moscow informed about the pace and scope of its program. It is talking about making deep cuts in the United States strategic nuclear force, though the only reductions it has so far announced are the retirement of 50 MX missiles and two Trident submarines.

Washington has offered to help fill gaps in Russia's network of early warning radars and other forms of cooperation, including joint production of nuclear reactors. What Washington is not prepared to do is negotiate a detailed arms control treaty to take the place of the ABM accord.

"The clear preference is not to have a formal cold-war style set of negotiations that produces a 300- page document that lays out what can be done and what cannot be done by two adversaries," a senior official said. "That is not the sort of relationship we want to have with Russia."

Critics said the administration's proposal to inform the Russians about the development of missile systems but not to subject the United States to formal limits failed to provide Moscow with sufficient assurance to believe that a limited American shield would stay limited. That, the critics said, will pressure Moscow to deploy multiwarhead missiles and take other steps to preserve its offensive striking power.

"Treaties that place limits on the testing and deployment of defensive systems provide predictability to all sides about the future strategic environment," said Ivo Daalder, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "And it is that predictability that will enable Russia to avoid worst case assumptions and to continue to reduce its nuclear arsenal significantly. It is wrong to equate arms control treaties with the cold war. Treaties are an instrument for reducing tensions among states in a cold war and for avoiding a return to the cold war."

The 1972 treaty limits testing of antimissile technology. But it does not preclude all development or deployment. The Russians have, in fact, deployed 100 interceptors near Moscow, as the pact permits.

As political pressure grew in the Clinton administration to pursue an antimissile shield, officials developed plans for a limited system. Their approach was to test elements of the program and, if successful, deploy 100 interceptors in Alaska.

To address Moscow's worries, the Clinton administration proposed to amend, not jettison, the ABM accord. Many of the prohibitions, including the ban on the testing and deployment of space-based and sea-based defenses, would have been retained.

From the start, however, the Bush administration has been far more radical. It committed itself to deploying an antimissile shield before it devised a test program.

The goal is a multitiered program that can intercept missiles right after launching, destroy warheads in space and knock out any surviving warheads as they re-enter the atmosphere. In an echo of Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, or Star Wars plan, the Pentagon even plans to test a space-based laser and space-based interceptors

that would destroy missiles in their boost phase, three to five minutes after launching.

The first elements of the program, the interceptors in Alaska, could be deployed as early as 2006. The Pentagon even has a plan to rush the ground-based interceptors into the field by 2004 should a crisis arise. The ultimate goal is to blunt an attack by dozens of missiles, not hundreds. But the precise design of the system is still undetermined.

The Pentagon's basic approach has been to finance an array of options, at a cost of $8 billion a year, and see which systems work. Lt. Gen. Ronald T. Kadish of the Air Force, who oversees the missile defense program, told Congress last week that he could not say what the system would look like in 5, 10 or 15 years.

But the White House has no interest in detailed talks about permissible testing and deployments. "This is not about lining in, lining out the ABM treaty to try to get a little bit of flexibility to do this test or that test," Condoleezza Rice, Mr. Bush's national security adviser, said last week.

"There's a good reason not to get into 15-year negotiations, which is what it has taken to create arms control treaties," Ms. Rice added. "I'm saying it's not necessary."

Although Washington does not want another arms negotiation, it does want Russia's blessing to proceed with its program. That is not only important for building new ties with Moscow, but it is also important to soothe European anxieties and to maintain Congressional support for multibillion-dollar effort.

Time is running out. The State Department sent a cable to its diplomats this month advising them that the testing program would "come into conflict with the ABM treaty in months, not years."

If it does not obtain Russia's approval to abandon the ABM treaty, Washington can withdraw on six months' notice. The administration is hoping that the withdrawal threat will pressure the Russians to come to an accommodation with Washington. Pulling out of the accord, however, is a double-edged sword and would have consequences for the Bush administration that could exceed the uproar in Europe over the White House opposition to the Kyoto environment accord.

"If the ABM treaty is changed," a German official said, "it should be a negotiated solution between the United States and the Russians. Our concern is that there is a framework that has served us well and that we should only do away with the old framework if we have a better one."